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Approaches to Political Commentary in Scandinavia

A Call for Textual, Evaluating Scholarship

Mette Bengtsson

Abstract

Political commentary is a contested genre that has attracted a great deal of attention in the Scandinavian public debate, whereas the scholarly literature on it is still in an initial phase. In order to strengthen future research, the present paper suggests a two-dimensional matrix indexing the research on Scandinavian political commentary along the dimensions text/context and descriptive/evaluative. The matrix enables us to see more clearly what we already know and where we lack knowledge. It enables us to see how each category can be developed, the interplay among them, and the obvious lack of textual, evaluative approaches. The author argues that a joint, cross-disciplinary engagement is necessary if we are to adequately understand the potentials and problems of political commentary.

Keywords: political commentary, pundits, political journalism, evaluative research, rhetoric, cross-disciplinary

Introduction

In Scandinavia, political commentary has been a rapidly emerging genre within the past decade (Hopmann and Strömbäck 2010). Peter Mogensen, Michael Kristiansen, and Thomas Larsen are familiar names in Denmark; Lena Mellin, K-G Bergström, and Mats Knutson in Sweden; and Marie Simonsen, Stein Kåre Kristiansen and Elin Ørjasæter in Norway. The positive view is that political commentators are essential translators, enlightening an uninitiated public: They are key figures in a trend in political journalism where political journalists *fight back* (Blumler 1997:399) or *counter-spin* (McNair 2000) against the professionalization of political communication (Blumler and Kavanagh 1999; Negrine 2008). A critical reading sees political commentators as handy hacks who help fill out the 24-hour news circuit (Bro 2008:197) and criticizes them for partiality under a cover of impartiality (Vatnøy 2010:31) and for spearheading an interpretative journalistic mode that focuses on politicians' assumed cynical strategies, neglecting political issues (Cappella and Hall Jamieson 1997; Kock 2009, 2011).

Within the past few years, a massive critique of political commentators has been advanced in the Scandinavian public debate (Bengtsson 2011), and has come primarily from citizens, but also from scholars, politicians, and self-critical political editors. E.g., former Danish Prime Minister Lars Løkke Rasmussen confronted two popular political

commentators in an interview: “Honestly, I’m really tired of political commentators [...] It is an impediment for democracy when we have a debate, and reporting from the debate is at a minimum, whereas people like you take up most of the time. If you are so talented, why don’t you run for a seat yourselves? To me this is a huge democratic problem.” (TV2, April 2009, my translation). Furthermore, young politicians in both Norway and Denmark have advanced some of the most publicized critique, e.g., Audun Lysbakken and Torbjørn Røe Isaksen’s “Kommentariatets diktatur” (“The dictatorship of the punditocracy”) and Jakob Engel Schmidt and Peter Hummelgaard Thomsen’s “Skrud ned for de politiske kommentatorer” (“Mute the pundits”).

Despite the massive public focus and critique, the Scandinavian scholarly literature has paid little attention to the genre. This literature is still in an initial phase: There are few primary contributions that address the genre as it develops in Scandinavian (see, however, Bro 2011; Hopmann and Strömbäck 2010). Instead, observations, explanations, and critical remarks are advanced as asides in a more general discussion of political journalism and media trends (Hjarvard 2008, 2010; Allern and Ørsten 2011; Kock 2011). The dominant focus on the general media development is understandable and inevitable, but in this case it has turned attention away from an important and contested genre. The picture is further confused because different scholarly traditions are approaching the phenomenon. The cross-disciplinary field includes, e.g., media studies, political science, and rhetoric, resulting in a broad variation in methods, approaches, and theoretical frames and references. Obviously, this can be a force, but at present the approaches hardly respond to one another.

To push research on political commentary out of this initial phase, this paper offers a literature review. By way of introduction, the paper will discuss definitional problems. Then, a two-dimensional matrix is introduced, and the most significant approaches are placed in it, which finally leads to a discussion of perspectives for future research.

Defining Political Commentators

As Alterman expresses it: “Defining who is and who is not a pundit at any given time can be a tricky matter” (1999:5). Several synonyms, e.g., *political commentator*, *political pundit*, *political expert*, are used loosely and interchangeably, each term with a range of different uses and meanings. Reviewing the American literature, Dan Nimmo and James Combs define *pundit* broadly as “one who gives opinion in an authoritative manner” (Nimmo and Combs 1992:xvi), while Alterman proposes the term *punditocracy* and defines it more narrowly: “The punditocracy is a tiny group of highly visible political pontificators who make their living offering ‘inside political opinion and forecasts’ in the elite national media.” (1999:4) Among Scandinavian scholars the same diversity is manifest. Some use the term *commentator* for all external expertise in political journalism, e.g., former spin-doctors, minister’s advisers, academic scholars, and pollsters (see, e.g., Hopmann and Strömbäck 2010:951); others limit the term to a smaller group of people, trained in journalism, who often appear in journalistic settings (see, e.g., Bro 2011:2-3). Furthermore, things are complicated by different media systems and cultural traditions (Hallin and Mancini 2004). Discussing political commentary with scholars outside of Scandinavia, one realizes that the role of the political commentator as understood in Scandinavia is somehow idiosyncratic, especially the common understanding of the

political commentator as an in principle impartial analyst. Finally, definitions are challenged because of the translation of terms; for example, *pundit*, which originates from the Sanskrit term *pandit* (panditá) and means “learned”, is often used in the American literature, but is not easily translated into Norwegian, Swedish or Danish.

My suggestion is that a political commentator should be defined as a *person who is framed by national broadcast or print media as a political insider and given the time or space to advance his/her personal political interpretations on a regular basis*. This definition emphasizes the media’s role in the creation of this new kind of expertise, whose credibility is largely crafted by the media’s framing. Styling the person as ‘political commentator’ is an endorsement in itself, because the media thereby appoint the commentator to a position superior to other more anonymous journalists or academics. Often, the privileges that come with the position include, among other things, a base in Parliament, where the Scandinavian tradition allows a few selected journalists to have offices. This gives the political commentator a privileged chance to have informal talks with central political actors, and thus a possibility to cultivate relations of crucial importance. In this definition, political commentators also have programs or columns of their own with daily or weekly access to a national audience. Usually, the title of the program or column involves the commentator’s name, for example “Mogensen and Kristiansen” (the first and most viewed program with political commentators in Denmark) and “Backstage with Hans Engell” (a popular column in the largest Danish tabloid), and the privileged position is often also emphasized in print media with an oversized picture of the commentator in a central position. In contrast, academic experts are seldom exposed in this way.

Of course, everyone is not in a position to become a political commentator through the media’s framing alone. As the genre is practiced in Scandinavia, *insider knowledge* is also a component, and typically the commentator has had a career as, e.g., a politician, a political journalist, an advisor, and, in rare cases, an academic. Not infrequently, political commentators draw attention to this insider status in their texts. Typical expressions are “the inside story is that...,” while another frequent technique is to address politicians by their first names, emphasize their close, almost personal relation to central actors. The insider position is even sometimes articulated explicitly, as e.g. in this statement from Danish political commentator Peter Mogensen: “I know what the world looks like behind the thick walls of the Parliament. I know exactly what is going on and what they think.” (*Kristeligt Dagblad*, September 2010, my translation).

Discussing bordering genres and the media evolution is also a way to delimit the genre. The editorial borders on political commentary: both genres break with traditionally news-oriented political journalism (see, e.g., Hjarvard 2010), but compared to the political commentator, the editorialist evaluates topical issues of general concern in a much wider context than national politics and claims no insider position. Compared to the role of anchors in the US, who sometimes also enjoy celebrity status, as signaled in their program titles (e.g. “CBS Evening News with Scott Pelley”), Scandinavian political commentators’ statements are typically regarded more as their personal reflections, less as the voice of the medium. Also, anchors interview people, political commentators do not; they are sources themselves, playing dual roles as both journalists and sources.

In my opinion, it is this specific role that needs attention, not experts in general, as some of the above-mentioned definitions suggest. Only by narrowing the definition, we can highlight the different ways in which various kinds of expertise function. Academic

expertise is another interesting subject, but it has already been intensively scrutinized (see, e.g., Albæk et al. 2003; Albæk 2004; Arnoldi 2005). Also, I believe the definition suggested here better reflects the public, everyday use of the word in Scandinavia, and as Carolyn Miller has it: “when a type of discourse or communicative action acquires a common name within a given context or community, that’s a good sign that it’s functioning as a genre” (2004).

Introducing the Matrix and the Dimensions

After these introductory remarks, I will now turn to a literature review organized in a matrix with two dimensions: 1) the scholar’s focus (text or context), and 2) the scholar’s purpose (descriptive or evaluative). The matrix enables us to see more clearly what we already know and where we lack knowledge. It further enables us to see how each category can be developed, to understand the interplay among them, and to note the obvious lack of textual, evaluative approaches (grey marking). Before presenting the four main categories in the matrix and the most important approaches within them, an overview of the dimensions might be helpful.

Figure 1. Two-Dimensional Matrix, indexing Approaches to Scandinavian Political Commentary

	CONTEXTUAL	TEXTUAL
DESCRIPTIVE	Scholars concerned with describing the genre from a contextual perspective.	Scholars concerned with describing the genre from a textual perspective.
EVALUATIVE	Scholars concerned with evaluating the genre from a contextual perspective.	Scholars concerned with evaluating the genre from a textual perspective.

The first dimension concerns the *focus* of the different approaches to political commentary. Reviewing the present approaches, one can make a rather rough division between approaches based on textual analysis and contextual considerations. *Textual analysis* I define as scholarship centered on readings of one or a selected sample of texts. Textual analysis implies that writers are intentional agents who affect the world around them through spoken or written words. *Contextual analysis* I define as scholarship based on more general considerations of structures, systems, and historical context. Scholars are here occupied with the structures and the ways in which these structures impinge on people’s actions and thoughts. This rather rough division can easily be criticized for oversimplification and a neglect of the approaches that link the two. Not only sociologists like Anthony Giddens (1984), but also media scholars and rhetoricians have emphasized the complex interaction between text and context (Jensen 2002; Geisler 2004; Lundberg and Gunn 2005). Nonetheless, it is a constructive way in this case to survey the research: most approaches favor either textual or contextual analysis and come to very different conclusions.

The other dimension concerns the *purpose* of the scholarship. Should we as scholars evaluate the things we study with the aim of influencing ongoing developments in

society? And if so, on what basis are we to set up the criteria for such evaluation? This has been an ongoing discussion in the academic field, especially within the humanities and social sciences, as both deal with people, their actions and the common good. In regard to, for instance, education or health science normative considerations have been inevitable in approaching the challenges within these sectors, but many media scholars have been and still are reluctant to be evaluative, especially in the Nordic countries as Lars Nyre argues (2009).

I would argue that a new phenomenon like political commentary needs to be approached from both descriptive and evaluative angles. Having answered a descriptive research question like “Is the number of political commentators increasing?” in the positive, a natural continuation is an evaluative research question like “In what positive and negative ways does this increase affect public debate?” Similarly the other way around: having categorized a number of more or less constructive textual functions in political commentary, a quantitative verification is an obvious follow-up.

Placing the Most Significant Approaches in the Matrix

Below, the most significant approaches are placed in the matrix. Each category is introduced with a brief presentation of its main characteristics, including an overview of typical research questions, followed by references to the most important contributions, emphasizing the advantages and disadvantages of each approach, and future perspectives.

Descriptive, Contextual Approaches

The approaches in the descriptive, contextual category typically address political commentary by describing the interconnection between media and politics and the practice of journalism. They draw on a nuanced knowledge of the historical development in news production as a basis for different explanations of why political commentary is a preferred genre in today's news outlets. A typical research question is: What historical and structural developments can explain the present rise in political commentary? Within this research category, the most important contributions come from Peter Bro and Anker Brink Lund (2008), Peter Bro (2008, 2011), and Stig Hjarvard (2008, 2009).

Bro focuses on the historical development in journalism as a way of explaining the strong presence of political pundits in contemporary journalism. According to him, varying external conditions have influenced the practice of journalism through the ages and have pushed journalists toward either news-oriented or views-oriented journalism, respectively. For example, the invention of the telegraph resulted in more news-oriented ways of reporting because of the risk of getting disconnected; the principle of the four W's (who, what, when and where) and the H (how) stems from this period, whereas the First and Second World Wars again resulted in more views-oriented ways of reporting, because people needed interpretations of the empirical facts to make use of them in a world in conflict (Bro 2008, 2011; Bro and Lund 2008). In contemporary journalism, Bro calls attention to the rocketing amount of copy- and airtime to be produced as one main reason for the growth in views-oriented journalism and hence also in political commentary (Bro 2008:197). He argues that views-oriented journalism allows for fast and inexpensive production with political commentators as a popular source because of their

ability to work within practical constraints (compared to, e.g., academic experts, who are not always trained in presenting their research in media-friendly ways), and also because of their ability to comment on a broad range of subjects – an adaptability that Bro compares to a Swiss Army knife (2008:196; 2011:10). Finally, Bro underlines the fact that in the beginning of the 20th century journalists started working in political administration and political organizations as *para-journalists*; later on, when there was a lack of expert knowledge about the relationship between journalism and politics due to a traditional focus in the social sciences on politics and in the humanities on journalism, the para-journalists entered the arena and filled this gap as political commentators (2008:196–197; 2011:3–4).

Hjarvard approaches the phenomenon along the same lines, describing the historical development and tendencies that have created space for political commentary in today's journalism (2008, 2009). According to Hjarvard, the media have historically taken on four different roles: first as a political tool; second as a cultural institution promoting politics; third as a cultural institution investigating politics; and fourth as an independent institution creating mediated politics. In the final stage, which runs from the late 1980s, the media plays an active part in shaping public opinion, influencing both political agenda-setting and the public attitude toward and attention to political issues. Hjarvard writes: "Today's media are not just passing on agendas and opinion from other institutions, they are to a certain extent creating public opinion themselves" (2008:71, my translation). According to Hjarvard, the political commentator is located at the heart of this development toward independent media institutions creating mediated politics. Hjarvard construes political commentators as postmodern fortune-tellers (prognosticators), who do not believe in 'truth', but interpret the world around them (2009:6). What occupies the political commentator is how today's actions will affect future scenarios, and this discourse influences traditional academic experts, who are challenged and sometimes feel pressured to engage in fortune-telling. Hjarvard's attitude toward this development is positive, but he points to an obvious downside: when the fortune-telling becomes so dominant that we forget it is only based on simplistic and tendentious guess work that should always be questioned and discussed (2009:9).

Some of the evident advantages of the descriptive, contextual research contributions are the insight into the development of structural constraints in journalism and careful descriptions of consequences for the present journalistic practice. However, the contextual focus turns the attention strongly toward the media and their economic and structural challenges and away from the purposes and functions of the genre and the ways in which it serves (or does not serve) readers' needs. Questions about the genre's democratic potential (or the opposite) remain unanswered.

Descriptive, Textual Approaches

The approaches in this category describe political commentary as it manifests itself within a sample of texts representing the genre, typically by applying content analysis to a large text corpus. The research questions focus on descriptive matters: Is the number of political commentators increasing? What are the recurrent topics in political commentary? This category is the most comprehensive, including contributions from Sigurd Allern (2010), David Nicolas Hopmann and Jesper Strömbäck (2010), Mark Ørsten and Lasse Skjoldan (2011), and Marie Hemmingsen and Mette Sigtenbjerggaard (2008).

Performing content analysis on texts from the Norwegian election campaigns in 1965, 1989, and 2009, respectively, Allern describes a development similar to that described by Hjarvard. However, instead of viewing the political commentator as a new role, Allern argues that the pundit role has changed over time: from being a leading party member and agitator with strong ideological motives in the 1960s, the pundit is now an independent interpreter and part of a showcased elite, functioning as trademark for a newspaper and turning politics into a horse race (2010). However, I do not see this view as being in fundamental disagreement with Hjarvard, but as symptomatic of a definitional confusion.

Another study in this category is Hopmann and Strömbäck's longitudinal study of the visibility of journalists and media pundits in Danish journalism around the parliamentary elections from 1994 to 2007, both in public service media (*DR*) and in semi-commercial, semi-public service media (*TV2*). Performing content analysis of 2022 items, they find evidence for a range of hypotheses, e.g., that the proportion of stories with journalists or media pundits performing as commentators has increased over time (2010:951–952), and that commentators more often have a right-wing than a left-wing background (2010:953–954). Their study is the first of its kind and hence an essential contribution. However, 'political commentator' is defined very broadly, as noted earlier, and also in a rather circular fashion, and merely cumulatively: "by media pundits we refer to journalists appearing as commentators (primarily from other media than the news bulletin in question), former spin-doctors and minister's aides, scholars and pollsters" (2010:951). Conversely, their study does not include commentators from the news outlet in question and the rocketing number of pundit programs in general. Had it done so, their study would have provided a truer and fairer picture, and most likely with a strengthened conclusion.

In another significant study, Ørsten and Skjoldan analyzed the topics discussed by political commentators during the Danish general election in 2011 (2011). The study shows that 57 percent of the coverage in major newspapers and television news shows was commentary on strategy, tactics and person-focused topics, including opinion polls (19 percent), alliances and block politics (13 percent), internal controversies within the blocks (11 percent concerning the right wing, 7 percent concerning the left wing), and the tax inquiry on the husband of Helle Thorning-Schmidt (former opposition leader, currently Prime Minister) (5 percent). The remaining 43 percent covered more substantive matters, primarily economic topics (25 percent) and immigration policy (11 percent) (2011:25). At first glance, the substantive share seems relatively large, but as the authors imply, the substantive topics were often placed in a strategic frame, e.g., proposals on immigration policy were solely treated as strategic moves, and the actual proportion of substantive analysis is therefore much lower. The important merit of their study is the analysis of the topics involved, which confirms earlier studies investigating the relative proportions of substance and process coverage in political journalism (e.g., Cappella and Hall Jamieson 1997). As the authors stress, their finding is not a surprising result, but again an important verification. The study can be criticized for the insufficient information offered about coding categories and coding process, which makes discussion difficult. When a fixed set of coding categories is applied, the probability of being biased and perhaps ignoring other important content categories or rhetorical functions is evident. The coding in the study zooms in on the substance/strategy ratio, but other rhetorical parameters might have been worth paying attention to as well.

Finally, Hemmingsen and Sigtenbjerggaard's study, which describes the underlying norms in political commentary, also belongs in this category (2008). Using Vilhelm Aubert's role theory, the authors characterize the political commentator as a hybrid between a journalist, an expert, and a politician, who creates a new space for maneuvering within political journalism. Based on textual analysis of a fairly limited sample of political commentary selected during the period of the foundation of Liberal Alliance, a new Danish right-wing party, and qualitative interviews with a number of political commentators, editors and politicians, the authors point to some of the qualities that are often referred to when political commentators elicit praise for what they do. Their conclusion is that an excellent political commentator has *practical competence*, which means that the commentator has political inside knowledge (2008:75–76), and *performance quality*, which means that the commentator is a deft communicator and also to some extent entertaining (2008:78). The study provides interesting insights into the media's underlying logic and implicit quality criteria. However, it does not critically discuss these norms, nor does it consider aspects of power and possible differences in norms across different media or over time.

The above studies leave no question that descriptive, textual research is essential for a better understanding of the phenomenon. Currently, we have little knowledge, and our intuitions about the genre need to be qualified. Documenting that the number of political commentators has actually increased and analyzing what political commentators actually talk about are important steps on the way to a better understanding of the genre. Nonetheless, as emphasized in connection with each approach, development is needed within this category. The textual analysis advanced primarily consists of content analysis applied to a larger text corpus, whereas other textual approaches, for example close reading of single texts, are non-existent. Through close reading, one would be able to focus on other perspectives like, e.g., the purpose and function of a text, advanced subject positions or the commentator's self-representation.

Contextual, Evaluative Approaches

Now, we turn away from the purely descriptive approaches and consider the evaluative approaches. In the first subcategory, which focuses on contextual approaches, the critique is primarily aimed at the way in which modern media frame political debate, arguing that political commentators are frontrunners in the strategy-oriented journalism that has thrust issue-oriented journalism into the background. This has a negative influence on the way we deliberate on common issues, and does not help citizens make up their minds on issues of common concern. While the descriptive approaches document this development, the evaluative approaches denounce it. Typical research questions are: In what ways is the development in political journalism problematic? What can be done to improve public political debate? Within this category the most important contributions come from Christian Kock (2009, 2011) and Eirik Vatnøy (2010).

Kock argues that the focus on strategy and tactics has prevailed and, following Cappella and Jamieson (1997), enlarges on the dominating *cynical* view on politics in political journalism. In this view, politicians are seen as power-drunk strategists solely motivated by retaining or gaining power for themselves, their wing, or their party, rarely saying something they actually mean, and voters are seen as argument-resistant

utility-maximizers, driven solely by their fixed preferences and therefore impervious to argumentation (2009). According to Kock, political commentators are the driving force in this cynical understanding of politics (2011:201). Kock's underlying positive notion is what he calls an *argumentation democracy*, in which journalists, politicians, and citizens consider relevant arguments for and against given policies and respond honestly to counterarguments and critical questions. In this process, some people may change their views, but just as often they will strengthen, elaborate, and moderate them. Deliberation is the necessary glue that holds society together, as in the traditions of Isocrates and Cicero, and when people do not deliberate, social cohesion is weakened. Kock summarizes his view in this very direct way: "Stop believing that voters are selfish, unmovable, and argumentation-resistant. Give them arguments! Make sure these are true, relevant and weighty. Make sure that counterarguments and critical questions are answered. Stop covering politics as if survival in a self-serving power struggle is all-embracing (and admirable) in politicians. Voters have little use for such political journalism. At best, entertainment." (2011:213, my translation)

Analyzing the Norwegian general election in 2009, Vatnøy advances many of the same perspectives (2010). He, too, is critical of the media's one-sided focus on power struggle and deplores its consequences for democratic public debate. In an essayistic style, he asks some central questions about the political commentator and his role – however, without trying to answer them: How are political commentators selected? What are their professional and ethical qualifications? Political commentators often claim that they possess a professional objectivity, but is partisanship not just as often the case? What are the criteria for their judgments? In addition to these thought-provoking questions, Vatnøy contributes some insightful considerations regarding the journalistic setup: E.g., although political commentators may not get most airtime in mediated political debates, they hold a powerful position introducing and especially evaluating the debates. In these situations, political commentators are puffed up to chief referees, gaining a unique opportunity to influence public opinion (2010:70).

Kock and Vatnøy are placed within the contextual, evaluative category despite the fact that they use examples from actual debate. They are both concerned with the media context and use examples to illustrate this, but in the works cited they do not do close readings of entire texts or content analysis of text corpora. Undoubtedly, their contributions are necessary and appropriate criticisms. It is decisive that somebody manages to step back and view a practice from a distance, identifying an ongoing development and its problematic influence on deliberation. Nonetheless, the structural and economic factors underlying this influence must be recognized. Political commentators are an important force when media have to feed a 24-hour news cycle: they are dependable manpower, journalists by training, and easily accessible. Such broader structural constraints are difficult to change, and evaluative research might be more influential if it were to focus not only on condemning the genre as a whole, but also on proposing how political commentators could act in more constructive ways. Lars Nyre urges researchers to adopt an *instructive attitude*, which implies that a researcher's critique should aim for the changeable (2009:4), and Ørsten and Skjoldan make a similar point: "The debate on political commentary should not be about the justification of its existence, but about what makes a good political analysis, and to what extent such analysis should be central." (2011:25, my translation) Kock and Vatnøy's general plea for more issue-

oriented journalism is one that many people agree with, and it definitely sets up a goal worth striving for, but is also very idealistic and general. Close reading of a sample of political commentary would provide more specific suggestions for change, taking different ways of doing political commentary as its starting point. An evaluative scholar also should not ignore the number of people reading or seeing political commentary. In some ways, people do find it useful, and people consider some political commentators better than others. These facts suggest that a differentiation and constructive evaluation of the genre is desirable as well as possible.

Textual, Evaluative Approaches

Reviewing Scandinavian media, rhetoric and communication journals makes it clear that the textual, evaluative approach is strikingly absent. Apart from a recent article by Pia Wold, there is to my knowledge no research taking a textual, evaluative approach to political commentary. This section therefore has a different structure than the former three: I present Wold's work, but will mainly explain how I see a potential for developing research within this category.

Citing concrete textual examples, Wold shows how national commentators and editors changed from a negative to a positive attitude toward the right-wing leader, Erna Solberg, during the Norwegian general election campaign in 2009, but without putting forward actual arguments for their collective change of view (2013). Referring to Kock's concept of cynicism, she criticizes commentators for being "watch dogs running in a pack" ("Vaktbikkjer i flokk", cf. the title), influenced by opinion polls, applying the logic that if a party is doing well, then the party leader is talented (2013:11). Wold also points to a tendency to use a range of what she calls *sophistic techniques* like rationalizing after the event, generalizing claims and referring to unclear and anonymous sources (2013:20). Wold contributes new insights that are made possible only through close reading. One should, however, be aware that she has a wide definition of commentary that includes editorials, and like Kock and Vatnøy her evaluation is negative, leaving little room for a constructive attitude.

Two things characterize the evaluative approaches. First, apart from Wold, most evaluative research focuses primarily on context and uses actual texts primarily for exemplification, not as independent objects of study. Second, the assessment is often negative and tends to blame the genre as a whole. For future research, I suggest that evaluative analysis take actual texts as objects of study in their own right, focusing on different kinds of political commentary and on how these either promote or obstruct democratic debate. Political commentators are influential actors, and in the act of communication they constantly shape the relation between themselves and their audiences. Their texts work as speech acts of power, sanctioning, authorizing, and positioning with consequences for human subjects (Freedman and Medway 1994:x). While content analysis primarily focuses on the general topics involved, as we saw in Hopmann and Strömbäck's and in Ørsten and Skjoldan's studies, a rhetorical genre analysis takes a pragmatic approach, focusing on rhetorical purposes, functions and speaker-audience relations represented in the text in order to arrive at an evaluative assessment. E.g., a historical analogy used to place a current debate in perspective may thus be a more constructive piece of political commentary than, e.g., a random guess at the strategic

motives prompting a political party to introduce a bill. While the former rhetorical move invites the audience to reflect on earlier debates and draw on learning from previous cases, the latter reduces the audience to spectators to a political drama.

For me as a rhetorician, an essential research question in this category would be: How do political commentators position their listeners, viewers and readers in ways that either enable or hamper participation in public life? We have a “need for some system of analysis that enables normative judgment of genres and texts, that foregrounds whose interests they serve, how they construct and position their writers and readers” (Freedman and Medway 1994:ix). The concrete manifestations and rhetorical functions of political commentary are manifold, and they are not all equally desirable from a democratic point of view. The evaluation that I suggest bases its criteria on the citizen’s democratic engagement a full-fledged democracy does not only give people rights and duties, it also fosters deliberation among its citizens. An effective democracy involves citizens as critical thinkers who take positions in discussions of common concerns not necessarily as active public debaters, participants in meetings, demonstrations or the like, but just as often as readers and listeners, and here the political commentator can play an essential role when delivering perspectives that are thought-provoking for the listening citizen. I here lean on, e.g., Robert Goodin and his notion of ‘deliberation within’ (Goodin 2000) and Simone Chamber and her notion of ‘deliberative rhetoric’ (Chambers 2009).

The above discussion harks back to the discussion between Walter Lippmann (1922) and John Dewey in the 1920s (1927). The two prominent political thinkers had very different views on citizens’ ability and willingness to engage in discussions of common issues and also differed with regard to the role of the expert. In today’s debate on the role of the political commentator, the two contrasting positions are still present, and Nimmo and Combs push things to extremes when positing the dichotomy “democracy or punditocracy?” (1992:165). On the one hand, political commentators can be regarded as an elite that has taken possession of the public debate, reducing citizens to spectators. On the other hand, political commentators can also be regarded as useful initiators in the public debate. Dewey’s concern with the mass media’s role and wish for new methods for bringing citizens closer together involves arguments for a necessary interaction among the experts and the public: “Inquiry, indeed, is a work which devolves upon experts. But their expertness is not shown in framing and executing policies, but in discovering and making known the facts upon which the former depend ... what is required is that they [the public, the many] have the ability to judge of the bearing of the knowledge supplied by others [experts] upon common concerns.” (1927:208-209) With their knowledge political commentators may play an essential role. At best, political commentators contribute to calling the public into existence by addressing readers as citizens and inviting them to reflect and be critical, and thus to be key figures in constituting civic engagement; but unfortunately, very few political commentators in the present Scandinavian political debate take this role upon themselves.

Reception Studies

As one can see from the above discussion, the Scandinavian research literature on political commentators is scattered, and many questions still have to be answered. Besides textual, evaluative scholarship, knowledge of the receiver’s perception of political

commentary is also something that we still lack, and learning more would require turning from textual and contextual approaches to empirical studies. Several scholars have argued that protocol analysis, qualitative interviews, and the like are constructive ways to gain a better understanding of communicative processes: “The receivers will always take part in the creation of communication. Therefore we should – without forgetting the rhetor-text relationship – pay more attention to the text-receiver relationship in order to investigate receivers and the reception situation ” (Kjeldsen 2008:48, my translation). Understanding what functions political commentary may have for readers, viewers and listeners would provide us with a better understanding of the genre. Entertainment is sometimes used as an explanation for the popularity of the genre, cf. Kock’s earlier statement, but with all due respect, one can easily find people in show business who are far more entertaining than Scandinavian political commentators. So, why do people read and watch political commentary? What do they use it for? Finding out more about the receiver’s uses of the genre, and the gratification(s) they derive from it, will let us begin to understand why this contested genre is still a central road into politics for many people. For future research, I suggest that a number of informants, selected to ensure variation in sex, age, and education level, be asked to read pieces of political commentary aloud and comment on what they like and dislike as they go along. Such a method, primarily inspired by protocol analysis (Ericsson and Simon 1984), can serve as a starting point for a conversation about the genre, achieving greater depths and more nuances than a qualitative interview alone, with the risks it entails for superficiality and repetition of typical views. Just as Catherine Schryer does when evaluating insurance letters, thus providing a fruitful discussion (2002).

Conclusion

The present literature review has been organized on the basis of the dimensions text/context and descriptive/evaluative in order to clearly underline that there is a lack of textual, evaluative approaches. Other ways of organizing this review would have been possible as well, e.g., the approaches could have been organized around their orientation towards the media or citizen, respectively, or based on the definition of the phenomenon. As shown, scholars take very different approaches to political commentary; yet these are not contrary or mutually exclusive, but supplementary. By establishing a common starting point for future research, I hope to have encouraged scholars from different fields, e.g., media studies, communication, rhetoric, and political science, to engage in cross-disciplinary work in order to scrutinize the potentials and problems of political commentary. The development in Scandinavian political journalism during recent years calls for a joint effort.

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